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ABSTRACT

Staff utilization, role definition and articulation, task overlap, educational requirements, certification, and status have been difficult issues within the library profession for most of this century, and remain mostly unresolved today. Over the past 20 years, library automation and declining budgets have caused the redistribution of the library workload, and given rise to this new category of employee, the paraprofessional, a position which has been largely uninhibited by associational policy or guidelines. Today, paraprofessionals administer major functional areas in the library, are assigned reference and information desk duties, perform a variety of systems work, and catalog most of the books added to collections, coming to dominate the technical service workforce. In the future, an increase in both tasks and responsibilities can be expected. This task overlap with professional librarians raises issues concerning salary, status, and professional education. A growing consensus suggests that the roles of librarians and support staff must be redefined, but before support staff roles can be put in order, librarians must first redefine their own roles. While agreement exists that the roles of all library staff must be clarified, the same issues remain unsolved: staff utilization, role definition, qualifications, and status. (Contains 10 references.) (MAS)

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Introduction

Staff utilization, role definition and articulation, task overlap, educational requirements, certification, and status have been cantankerous issues within the library profession for most of this century and remain largely unresolved today.

As early as 1923, Charles C. Williamson challenged librarians to distinguish unambiguously between professional and clerical tasks in his Carnegie Corporation-sponsored report, *Training for Library Service*. In 1927, the American Library Association's *Proposed Classification and Compensation Plans for Library Positions* marked the beginning of a long series of efforts to separate library tasks into discrete professional and clerical streams. In 1939, an ALA report advocated a three-tiered approach to staffing—professional, subprofessional, and clerical. By 1970, the ALA Council had approved the *Library Education and Personnel Utilization* (LEPU) policy statement which proposed formal educational requirements for all library staff and three distinct levels of employment for support personnel: library associates, library technical assistants, and clerks. Although efforts to create unambiguous staffing categories have largely failed to gain acceptance at the grass roots level, a distinctive new employment category has nonetheless emerged.

The Emergence of the Paraprofessional

Over the past twenty or more years, automation of library processes, declining budgets, contraction of higher education generally, and entry into the electronic information age have changed libraries. New library tasks have been created and others realigned. This redistribution of the library workload has given rise to a new category of employee, the paraprofessional. Driven largely by forces from outside the profession, the emergence of a paraprofessional category of library employment has been largely uninhibited by associational policy or guidelines.

The Role of the Paraprofessional

In a recent survey of their role, status, and working conditions, Oberg (1992) found that paraprofessionals constitute a vital, growing force within our libraries. Few traditional or newly created tasks are off-limits, and paraprofessionals are assigned complex duties that a generation ago characterized the work of librarians. Today, paraprofessionals administer major functional areas of our libraries, are assigned reference and information desk duties, perform a variety of systems work, and catalog most of the books that are added to our collections.

Paraprofessionals have had a dramatic impact upon technical services. In the brief period since the advent of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), they have come to dominate this workforce. A similar increase in the utilization of support staff may be occurring in public services as well. A movement toward tiered (or differentiated) reference service, and a past record of successful performance at reference and information desks is ensuring paraprofessionals a larger role in the direct provision of information. In a number of libraries, they have already assumed primary responsibility for basic reference.

Expected New Roles for Support Staff

We can expect support staff to be used increasingly in both new and reconfigured roles, in many cases performing tasks previously considered to be the exclusive province of librarians. In addition to increased responsibility for the direct provision of information to patrons, support staff will assume increased supervisory responsibility, including the hiring, training and evaluation of staff; complex support roles in computer technology and applications; and an ever greater responsibility for cataloging, acquisition, document delivery, and interlibrary loan. It is likely that eventually support staff will be granted primary responsibility for the day-to-day operations of our libraries.

Task Overlap and Role Confusion

The rapidly changing library workplace has created tension, even resentment, among support staff. Paraprofessionals see themselves performing the tasks they have watched librarians perform for years, as well as the challenging new tasks created by automation, but for less money and lower status. Whether or not the perception that significant task overlap exists is correct, it devalues the MLS and creates ill will between the two groups.

In 1992, Oberg warned that librarianship will fail to attain full professional status unless librarians come to grips with these staffing dilemmas. Although some task overlap is to be expected during a period of change, librarians remain curiously reluctant to redefine their own roles.

Towards a Redefinition of Librarianship

A growing consensus suggests that the roles of librarians as well

as support staff must be redefined. It has become increasingly clear that before librarians can resolve the issues of support staff, they need to put their own house in order. Increasingly, librarians suggest that the resolution of the profession's staffing dilemmas may require nothing less than a redefinition of librarianship itself.

In a search for common theoretical and methodological frameworks, Pritchard (1995) reminds us that librarianship is the study of all forms of recorded information, independent of place or package. She suggests that new roles will emerge, not from a study of today's changing tools and procedures but, rather, from an understanding of the field's structure, content, and services.

In its "Strategic Vision for Professional Librarians" document, the "visions" group of librarians has formulated a statement that redefines service, outlines innovative leadership roles for librarians, and articulates the values of the profession. Martin (1993) notes that achieving this vision would raise librarians' expectations of themselves and communicate the importance of librarianship and information studies.

The process of reinventing librarianship may not need to be a revolutionary one. Pritchard (1995) states that new roles for librarians can and should grow out of the things that we have always done: relating user needs to information availability; managing complex technological, financial, and bureaucratic systems; designing interconnected technical systems, organizational structures, and human interfaces; selecting and organizing information resources; teaching and consulting; articulating logical and intuitive insights about information; and interacting with the external environment through the formulation and articulation of information policy.

Professionalism Revisited

While agreement exists that the roles of all library staff must be clarified, many issues remain to be resolved. Adequate compensation, status, and continuing education opportunities elude today's paraprofessionals even though fair play for support staff is essential if they are to succeed in their new roles. In an age characterized by divisiveness and increasing assaults upon intellectual freedom, a means must be found by which all staff can be socialized into the values librarians promulgate and defend. And, importantly, the differences between support staff and librarians must be addressed honestly and forthrightly.

Veaner (1994) points out that automation has transformed most library workers into "knowledge workers" and that the once simple distinction between librarians and support staff fails to describe adequately the complexities of today's workplace. But, he cautions, control of the library's program and fiscal responsibility are inherent in the librarian's position and, by definition, cannot be delegated.

Many support staff, and not a few librarians, argue that the MLS should not constitute a barrier to advancement and that librarianship ought to be competency, rather than degree, based. Curiously, librarians remain reluctant to address these and other questions candidly, even though their reticence impedes the development of the field and limits their own status.

Automation, rapid change, and competition for control within the information sector has placed significant stress upon the library workplace. A resolution of the troublesome problems of staff utilization, role definition, qualifications, and status is long overdue.

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